Chapter 6
The Church (al-Qalīs) of Ṣan'ā' and Ghumdān Castle

Ghumdān/Ghamdān

The great castle of Ghumdān/Ghamdān is celebrated in the Yemen national ethos as an expression of the grandeur and both technical and aesthetic achievement of the ancient pre-Islamic civilisation. It is variously supposed to have been destroyed in the time of the third Caliph 'Uthmān[1] or, even earlier, by the Abyssinian conqueror Abrahah, but in fact it was evidently re-fortified a number of times. The descriptions of it that have survived in such authors as al-Hamdānī while no doubt containing a sub-stratum of fact, are so overlaid by legend as to be of very little factual value. Its four sides were of different coloured stone, one side white, one black, one green and one red; it had seven storeys each 40 *dhirā'* in height, or 20 storeys of 10 *dhirā'*,[2] etc. That it had copper/bronze (*naḥās*)[3] lions at each corner which roared when the winds blew and passed through the statues is acceptable, even likely in view of archaeological discoveries of lions elsewhere in the Yemen. The lights from its alabaster windows are beloved of the poets. 'Alqamah[4] in one of his verses lists the timbers used in its construction—*'ar'arah*[5] *munashsharah* sawn juniper, *sāj* Indian teak (*tectona grandis*)—though the African tree to which the Arabs give this name seems to be a different species, *ṣulb al-sidr* hard lote-tree wood, *labakh*[6] *Mimusops Schimperi*, and *ḍurūm* a tree with a sweet smell found in the Yemen, but this meaning seems uncertain.[7]

'Of the ancient side (*khadd*) of Ghumdān there remains a section/field of tangled ruins opposite the first and second of the eastern doors of the Jāmi' Mosque. The remains of Ghumdān are a great mound (*tall*) like a mountain, much of what is around it consisting of the dwellings of the Ṣan'ānīs. Of it is a chamber/house (*bayt*), and Ibn al-Faḍl al-Qarmaṭī fortified himself on the mound of it (*tall*) when he entered Ṣan'ā'.' This was how al-Hamdānī[8] knew it in the early 4th/10th century, and of course that part of Ṣan'ā' does form an eminence which is known to contain the debris of ancient times, but until it can be excavated it would be premature to say more about it. We can be sure it was a high building and the western fortification of the town, the Qaṣr being the eastern fortification.

1 Al-Hamdāni, *Iklil* VIII, Baghdad, 1931, 19. Al-Rāzī, *Tārikh madinat Ṣan'ā'* Damascus, 1947, 20, also treats of Ghumdān.
2 Ibid, 23, 15.
3 Ibid, 24. *Naḥās* in Ṣan'ā' today means brass. Cf. the poem, ibid, 16.
4 Ibid, 22.
5 It seems that *'ar'arah* can also mean cypress.
6 Cf. *Western Arabia and the Red Sea*, BR 527, 591.
7 *Dirm/durm*, in Lane's *Lexicon*, *durm*, *Gloss. daṭ.*, 2172, an odiferous tree. Muḥammad al-Akwa' in a footnote to his edition of *Iklīl* II, 354, commenting on al-Hamdānī's quotation from a 'Ḥimyarī' document mentioning 200 *rākibat dharaḥ* to be brought from the mountains between Ṣan'ā' and the Tihāmah to Wādī Ḍahr, says that the *rākibah* is a bulky timber laid on a structure so that another structure may be put on top of it. *Dharaḥ* is a valuable timber, tall trees with a thick bole and hard wood growing where there are wadis with running water, and near the Tihāmah, and in Wādī 'Annah.
8 Loc. cit., 15.

The Church al-Qalīs and Christians[9]

The case of the famous Church of Ṣan'ā' is rather different from that of Ghumdān, for al-Azraqī[10] provides what is at least a plausible account of it though one may be sceptical as to certain particulars of detail, and Wüstenfeld's text is sometimes faulty. The site, called Ghurqat al-Qalīs/al-Qullays,[11] is today still shown in Ṣan'ā', a shallow circular pit (*ghurqah*) about 2m deep. No reason is known to us to suggest this is other than genuinely the site of the Qalīs or *ecclesia*, so we have worked on the assumption that it is so. At one time there may even have been a Quarter or Ward called al-Qalīs as there is today, for al-Rāzī[12] quotes a man of 'the poor (*masākīn*) of al-Qalīs' who were registered as a group by the Dīwān when a distribution of alms was to be made in Ṣan'ā' in 191/806. The pit is illustrated on p.127.

The same author[13] reports a legend likely to have originated with the Christians before Islam, that Jesus came to visit Ṣan'ā' 'and prayed in the place of the church (*kanīsah*) so the Christians made the church in Ṣan'ā' where his place of prayer (*muṣallā*) was. This church in these days of ours is a ruin, and lies at the lowest part of the Zuqāq al-Mubayyiḍīn (The Tinsmiths' Lane) on the south (*'Adanī*) side opposite the Jewish synagogue (*bī'ah*) which still remains in Ṣan'ā' today. Of this church a corner (*ḍabr*) like a column (*usṭuwān*) remains at the edge of the road to the Sūq

9 For Christianity in pre-Islamic south Arabia, see J. Ryckmans, 'Le Christianisme en Arabie du sud préislamique', *Acc. Naz. dei Lincei, Atti del Convegno internazionale sul tema: L'Oriente cristiano nella civiltà*, Rome, 1964, an important survey.
10 *K. Akhbār Makkah*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig, 1895, 89.
11 The word *qīsn* is known in the pre-Islamic inscriptions. A curious passage in al-Hamdānī, *Iklīl* II, 87, speaks of a certain al-Qalīs b. Sharaḥbīl b. 'Amr Dhī Ghumdān b. Ilī Sharaḥ, adding, 'and to al-Qalīs b. 'Amr is attributed Qaṣr al-Qalīs in Ṣan'ā', which is an ancient building', and he cites a well-known verse by al-Radā'ī. Commenting on this, al-Akwa' says this castle is the one which Abrahah turned into a church (*kanīsah*) known today as Ghurqat al-Qalīs, in Ḥārat al-Qaṭī', near the Nuṣayr Mosque. He gives no authority for this identification. He mentions a village called al-Qalīs at the top of Jabal Ḥaḍūr.
12 Op. cit., 109.
13 Ibid, 32. Cf. al-Wāsi'ī, *al-Badr al-muzīl*, Cairo 1345 H, 4.

al-'Aṭṭārīn and the Damascus Quarter (*darb*), and I have come across many arches (*'uqūd*) remaining up till the year 390/1000.' It is possible that this is not al-Qalīs of the Abyssinians, but as a working hypothesis it is to be supposed that it lies somewhere east of the Coppersmiths' Market we know today, well in the central area of the old town. Coppersmiths of course would tin any household utensils they manufactured or, if this were a separate craft, it would surely be practised in close proximity to them.

Christian communities continued to flourish in the Yemen for several centuries after Islam. About the years 837-50 A.D. Peter (Mār Petrus) is mentioned as Bishop of the Yemen and Ṣan'ā' by Thomas of Margâ,[14] and, though his book contains absolutely no other information about Mār Petrus, it does indicate the existence of some sort of ecclesiastical organisation. In the time of the first Zaydī Imām al-Hādī (ob. 298/911) Christians are treated as a protected faith along with the Jews. He received *jizyah* poll-tax from them. but though he had the exclusive right to enjoy this source of revenue he did not do so. They were told to come to the Imām if any molested them, and during al-Hādī's wars with the Banu 'l-Ḥārith they, along with strangers (*ghurabā'*)[15] and Jews, were ordered to leave Mīnās.[16] Christians and Jews had landed properties (*ḍiyā'*) inherited from the pre-Islamic era, but they were obliged to sell any properties purchased after Islam to Muslims.[17]

These Christians were at least, in the main, those native to the country. Al-Qalīs on the other hand was constructed by a foreigner. When the Abyssinians came to the Yemen to avenge the Christians martyred at Najrān by the Jewish ruler Dhū Nuwās,[18] they burned Ghumdān,[19] 'the largest castle known on earth' and conquered the Yemen. It was not for aggrandisement alone that Abrahah built al-Qalīs for the Najāshī since he wrote to him, 'I have built you a temple (*bayt*) in Ṣan'ā' the like of which neither the Arabs or non-Arabs ('Ajam) have constructed, and I shall not desist until I divert the pilgrims (*ḥājj*) of the Arabs to it and they abandon the pilgrimage to their own temple.' The political motive is at once discernible—the creation of a new centre of politico-religious power,[20] to which might be added an economic gain in that pilgrimage centres are also markets and recipients also of votive offerings.

So, says al-Azraqī, Abrahah built al-Qalīs, using the stone of Qaṣr Bilqīs at Ma'rib—in this the account seems fanciful, though Yāqūt, in a separate entry on al-Qalīs, specifies variegated alabaster (*rukhām mujazza'*) and stones decorated with gold only.

Yāqūt also reports an inscription, his chain of authorities going back to Muḥammad b. Ziyād al-Ṣan'ānī who became governor of Ṣan'ā' in 133/750-1, 'I saw written on the door of al-Qalīs, it being the *kanīsah* (church) which Abrahah built at (*'alā*) the Gate of Ṣan'ā' or—at the Ṣan'ā' door (of the church)] in *musnad* (ancient South Arabian characters), "This was built for You as Owner/Master (*Mālik*)[21] so that Your name may be mentioned in it, and I am Your servant." There seems to be nothing inherently improbable about this report.

The following is the description given by al-Azraqī of the construction of al-Qalīs.

> It was regular, level on all sides (*murabba' mustawi 'l-tarbī'*) He (Abrahah) made its height[22] 60 *dhirā'*. Its raised area (*kibs*, lit., earth placed on an area to level it, plinth?) was 10 *dhirā'* high, and one ascended to it by alabaster/marble steps (*daraj al-rukhām*). Around it was a wall (*sūr*) with 200[23] *dhirā'* between it and al-Qalīs, surrounding it on every side. He put between that, all of it, stones (reading so for the text's 'with stones') which the people of the Yemen call *jurūb*, ornamented (*manqūshah*),[24] fitted into each other (*muṭābaqah*)[25] so that a needle could not enter between their courses (*aṭbāq*), stuck close together to it (*muṭabbaqah bi-hi*).[26] He made the height of the part he constructed of *jurūb* 20 *dhirā'* high. Between (each course of) *jurūb* stones he inserted (a course of) triangular stones like a camel's hump, entering into each other, of green, red, white, yellow and black stone, with *sāsam*[27] wood/beams(?) (*khashab sāsam*) between each two courses (*sāf*),[28] round of head (*rās*), the thickness of the beam (*khashabah*) being (that of) a man's chest/side (*ḥiḍn*), protruding over the building. So he used to insert this construction after this fashion. Then he inserted a frieze of alabaster/marble 2 *dhirā'* in height, the alabaster protruding 1 *dhirā'* beyond the building. Then over the marble he inserted (a course of) shining black stone of the stone of Nuqum, the mountain of Ṣan'ā', overlooking it. After this he placed shining yellow stone, then over that shining white stone. This was the exterior (*ẓāhir*) of the wall (*ḥā'iṭ*) of al-Qalīs, the breadth of al-Qalīs wall being 6 *dhirā'*. They say that they do not recollect the measurement (*dhar'*) of the length and breadth of al-Qalīs (from the outside?). It had a door of copper (*naḥās*)[29] 10 *dhirā'* in height by 4 *dhirā'* wide, the entry from which was to a chamber (*bayt*) in its interior, the length of which was 80 *dhirā'* by 40 *dhirā'*, supported by columns (reading *'umud al-sāj*)[30] of *sāj*-wood ornamented/painted[31] and (with) gold and silver nails (*masāmīr*). Then one enters from the chamber into an *īwān* (arched space) the length of which is 40 *dhirā'* on its right and left, its arches having mosaic applied to them, and being decorated (*mushajjarah*) with tree and shrub (motives),[32] with stars of gold figuring conspicuously (*ẓāhirah*) between their (the arches') interspaces (*aḍ'āf*). Then, from the *īwān* one enters to a dome (*qubbah*), 30 by 30 *dhirā'* which he walled with mosaic in which were crosses depicted in mosaic (*ṣulub manqūshah bi-'l-fusayfasā'*), gold and silver. In it (the dome) was a piece of alabaster (*rukhāmah*) next to the place of the rising of the sun, of *balaq*[33] (any colour mixed with white), square, 10 *dhirā'* by 10 *dhirā'*, (so bright) it causes anyone looking at it from the centre of the dome to cover the eye, conducting the light of the sun and moon inside the dome.

14 *Thomas of Margâ, the Book of Governors*, trans. E. Wallis Budge, London, 1893, II, 448.
15 In *Qānūn Ṣan'ā'*, this word means merchants or dealers not local to the town.
16 Al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifah*, Leiden, 1884-9, reads incorrectly Mīnān for Mīnās.
17 *Sīrat al-Hādī ila'l-Ḥaqq*, Beirut, 1972, 47, 58, 178; cf. index to C. van Arendonk, *Les débuts de l'Imamat Zaidite au Yémen*, trans. by J. Ryckmans, Leyde, 1960.
18 For the latest researches on this topic, see Irfan Shahîd, *The martyrs of Najrān; new documents*, Subsidia Hagiographica, no. 49, Bruxelles, 1971
19 Al-Azraqī, loc. cit.
20 As in the case when *ḥarams* or *ḥawṭahs* are founded.
21 *Mālik* would mean God.
22 This height 60 *dhirā'* seems most unlikely, but of course the ordinary observer would have no means of actually measuring it.
23 This figure also looks exaggerated; a figure of 200 *dhirā'* for the total distance from wall to wall would be easier.
24 *Manqūshah* could mean painted, sculptured, or, less likely here, inscribed. Houses in the northern mountains do in many places have zigzag lines done in whitewash on the stone courses.
25 See Fig. H.12.
26 It is not easy to see how this last phrase applies, unless the *bi-hi* refers to al-Qalīs.
27 A sort of tree of the mountains resembling ebony according to the lexicons.
28 Any row of bricks (*'araq*) of the wall (*ḥā'iṭ*), and a course or row (*ṣaff*) in a building.
29 More likely bronze.
30 The text has *mu'allaq al-'amal bi-'l-sāj*, but *al-'amal* seems impossible and easily misread for *al-'umud*. *'Allaq al-binā'* means, to make the building to be supported by pillars, etc.
31 Painted wood pillars could well be meant. Yāqūt says that Abrahah, *lakkaka-hā bi-anwā' al-aṣbāgh*, to lacquer/paint(?) with various dyes (colours?). Yāqūt would seem less dependable than al-Azraqī, but in view of the painted wooden ceilings we found in the Yemen his version is not without interest. *Iklīl* I, ed. Akwa', 394, cites verses mentioning *'ar'ar*, *sāj*-wood and stone used in the construction of Baynūn.
32 This is probably not to be taken too literally as *mushajjarah* can be applied to a variety of types of decoration.
33 *Balaq* of course is the name of a stone used in Yemeni architecture but it cannot have that sense here.

Underneath the piece of alabaster (*rukhāmah*) was a pulpit (*minbar*) of *labakh* wood—this being ebony (*ābnūs*) with them[34]—with intervening (courses?) of white ivory. The steps (*daraj*) of the pulpit of *sāj*-wood were covered (*mulabbas*) with gold and silver. In the dome were chains of silver.[35] In the dome, or in the chamber, was an ornamented (*manqūshah*) beam of *sāj*, 60 *dhirā'* long, called Ku'ayb, and a beam of *sāj* of similar length to it, called Ku'ayb's Wife, from which[36] they used to seek good fortune (*yatabarrakūna bi-himā*) in the Jāhiliyyah. Ku'ayb was called al-Aḥwazī, al-Aḥwazī meaning *al-ḥ rr*[37] in their language.

Abrahah is said by the legend to have treated the craftsmen working on al-Qalīs with great severity.

The founding of what was intended as a rival establishment to the Meccan temple provoked reaction there. One of the intercalators of the Banū Mālik b. Kinānah incited two youths to go to al-Qalīs and defaecate in it. This so enraged Abrahah that he decided to attack and destroy Mecca and, advancing on it with his famous elephant, he met disaster. The incidental details of the story merit comment—firstly it is significant that it is the intercalators of the pre-Islamic calendar who reacted against al-Qalīs—which implies power and influence that the Prophet Muḥammad was to destroy, no doubt, when he adopted the lunar year. The defilement of Abrahah's church was probably intended to show that it had no power to defend itself and, ergo, no virtue as a sanctuary and place of pilgrimage. The great size of the open area around the Church, even if the figures provided by al-Azraqī be whittled down to half, resembles that of the *ḥaram* around the Meccan Ka'bah and would be intended to accommodate pilgrim crowds.

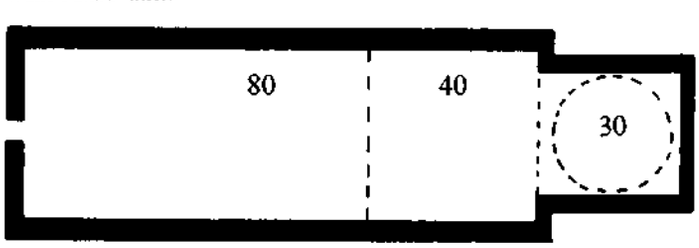

Fig. 6.1 Reconstruction of Abrahah's church at Ṣan'ā' (interpreted by R.B. Serjeant).

The story of the destruction of al-Qalīs, as related by al-Azraqī is no less interesting.

Al-Qalīs continued as it was until Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr (136-58/753-4 to 774-5) the Commander of the Faithful appointed al-'Abbās[38] b. al-Rabī' b. 'Ubaydullāh al-Ḥārithī governor over the Yemen. Al-'Abbās recalled the building materials (*niqḍ*), gold and silver, that were in al-Qalīs and this loomed large in his mind. It was said to him, 'You will acquire from it much property and a treasure.' So his heart longed to demolish it and take what was in it. He sent to a son of Wahb b. Munabbih and asked his advice about demolishing it, and said to him, 'More than one of the people of the Yemen have indicated to me that I should not demolish it, but the business of Ku'ayb is serious in my eyes.' Then he went on to say that the people of the Jāhiliyyah used to seek good fortune (*yatabarrakūn*) from it (Ku'ayb), and it used to speak to them and tell them of things, some of which they liked and some of which they disliked. Wahb's son said, 'All that you have heard is false. Ku'ayb was no more than an idol of the Jāhiliyyah by which they were deluded (*futinū*). So order the *duhul*,[39] i.e. the drum and a flute (*mizmār*) and have them close at hand—then make the demolishers go up on top of it and order them to (start) demolishing. The drum and flute will be spurring them on and keep them the more cheerful and you will make much money from the building material (*niqḍ*) from it as well as obtaining satisfaction from the scoundrels (*fasaqah*) who burned Ghumdān, and you will have expunged from your people the name of the building of the Abyssinians (al-Ḥabash) and cut off (all) memory of them.'

Now there was in Ṣan'ā' a Jewish scholar (*'ālim*). He had come to al-'Abbās b. al-Rabī' previously to gain his favour, and had said to him that a king who demolishes al-Qalīs will govern the Yemen for forty years. So when the words of the Jew and advice from Wahb b. Munabbih's son coincided in favour of it, he resolved to demolish it.

Abu 'l-Walīd said, 'A reliable person informed me saying, "I was there with al-'Abbās when he was demolishing it and he made a great deal of money out of it. Then I saw him call for chains. These they attached to Ku'ayb and the beam with it, and he (attempted to) get men to bear them[40] (the chains), but no one would come near them out of fear because of what the people of the Yemen used to say about them.[41] So he called for *w r d yūn*,[42] i.e. wheels, and attached the chains to them, then oxen, and men with them, pulled them until they brought them out[43] of the wall (*sūr*). When the people saw nothing of the harm which they feared from them, a man of the people of Iraq, a merchant in Ṣan'ā', sprang up,[44] bought the beam and cut it for a house of his. It was not long however before the Iraqi became affected by leprosy (*judhām*), and the rabble said, 'This is because of his buying Ku'ayb.'" He continued, "Then I saw the people of Ṣan'ā' after that going round[45] al-Qalīs and picking up the bits of gold and silver from it."'

The narrative conveys unequivocally that the demolition and plundering of al-Qalīs which figures as one of the glories of ancient Ṣan'ā' in the early poets was unpopular with the Ṣan'ā' populace and resented by them without distinction of Muslim or Christian. The adherents of both faiths evidently held Ku'ayb and his Wife in superstitious reverence of the sort that Muslim orthodoxy correctly classes as pagan. The reverence extended to the pillars al-Masmūrah and al-Manqūrah of the Jāmi' Mosque is of a similar genre but any pagan elements that may have attached to them in the minds of the commonalty have been purged and extruded from the descriptions of al-Wāsi'ī.[46] It is to be remarked that the penalty for swearing a false oath at the two pillars of the Jāmi' Mosque is affliction with leprosy (*judhām*) as it was in the case of the Iraqi merchant who purchased and sawed up Ku'ayb. Perhaps in al-Qalīs too, oaths may have been taken at Ku'ayb in cases at dispute between two parties.

34 Presumably he means the Yemenis use *labakh* instead of ebony.
35 To hold lamps?
36 The dual should be read here.
37 *Ḥ rr* can be read in a number of ways, but I have no clue as to what is intended here.
38 Al-Qāsim *Ghāyat al-amānī*, Cairo, 1388 H, 129, calls him 'Abdullāh. There is some confusion in the sources about the names of early 'Abbāsid governors.
39 A Persian word; might it have been introduced by the Abnā'?
40 If the dual were read here this would refer to the two Ku'aybs, not to the chains.
41 The dual must be read here instead of *hā*.
42 This word is unknown to the lexicons consulted.
43 The dual should be read here.
44 Reading *wathaba* for *wathata*.
45 *Yaṭūfūna bi-*, which could be understood also in the technical sense of performing a ritual circumambulation of al-Qalīs; this is quite a possible interpretation of the text. The visitation of the pilgrims, by analogy with the practice at other Arabian shrines might have included a circumambulation (*ṭawāf*) of the Church, then when the pilgrims entered the church a circumambulation of Ku'ayb and his Wife, the pilgrims passing their hands over the columns as they did so.
46 Cf. p.316b seq.

Ṭabarī[47] quotes one account which maintains that Abrahah, after obtaining the approval of the Najāshī to construct his church at Ṣan'ā', wrote to Qayṣar, i.e. the Byzantine emperor, informing him that he was about to build a *kanīsah,* and asking him for aid. So Qayṣar assisted him with artisans (*ṣunnā'*), mosaic and marble. There is nothing inherently improbable in this, although it is reminiscent of the Byzantine aid contributed to the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus.

A much grander description of the decoration of the interior is vouched by Abū Ṣāliḥ the Armenian, seemingly a native of Egypt, writing about the first decade of the 13th century A.D. It looks as if Abū Ṣāliḥ relied on a Christian tradition about al-Qalīs, but again, although no detail of his account appears in any way inconsistent with what might have been, a suspicion lingers that the account could reflect the decoration of Coptic churches in Egypt.

Abrahah decorated al-Qalīs,[48] he says, with gold and beautiful dyes (*aṣbāgh,* paints ?) of various colours. He paved its floor (*arḍ*) with coloured marbles, set up pillars of marble in it, upright and horizontal (reading *'amada 'l-rukhām fi-hā qā'im-an wa-nā'im*),[49] and made it shine with a most lovely glittering of gold, silver, gilded and coloured glass. He plated its doors with gold and silver plates (*ṣafā'iḥ*), nailing the gold plates with silver nails and the silver with plate-like (*mulawwaḥah*)[50] nails of gold. On the doors of the altars (*madhābiḥ*) in it he put wide sheets of gold, studding them with jewels of precious stones, and he set in the middle of each of these sheets a cross of gold, in the middle of which was a jacinth (*yāqūtah*) of red translucent Bahramān.[51] He set up a screen (*ḥijāb*) for it of perfect workmanship, made of ebony and *sāsam*-wood inlaid (*muṭ'am*) with pure white ivory, beautifully carved.

When it became famous many people made the pilgrimage to it, bringing it votive offerings (*nudhūr*). Many people, says Abū Ṣāliḥ, *jāwaru bi-hā*—this means literally to become a neighbour to, and the word is commonly used of persons residing in Mecca in the sense of being neighbours to the Ka'bah. However it also means to go into retreat for meditation and prayer in a mosque, a sense which seems appropriate here. The king built these *mujāwirs* houses in which to dwell. He also built for the *kanīsah* many properties which he made *waqf* to it (*ḥabasa-hā 'alay-hā*).

If these last statements can be accepted as fact a possible explanation of the great size of the ambulatory as reported by al-Azraqī presents itself. As stated below the walled enclosure around the church at Axum was clustered with buildings. The same might have been the case at al-Qalīs. It is tempting to compare the *mujāwir* of those pre-Islamic Christian days with the *muhājir* of Islamic Yemen, the student living in the row of cells attached to the mosque. Presumably the area enclosed by the wall of al-Qalīs in Ṣan'ā' would moreover have something of the nature of a sacred enclave, a *hijrah* or *ḥaram.*[52]

Abū Ṣāliḥ reports also 'M rūr al-Dayr, it being a church around which is an impregnable fortress (*ḥuṣn*). It is now called Maqbarat al-Ḥukamā' (Cemetery of the Wise), and in this district is the Amīr of the Yemen on behalf of Kisrā Anūshirwān.'[53] This snippet of information looks important if only it were possible to interpret it.

Native Christianity in the Yemen does not seem to be known to our sources after the 4th/10th century[54] though this does not necessarily mean that it had disappeared, and in Socotra Island it still existed into Portuguese times.

The Remains of the Church (al-Qalīs)

The site, 175m west of the wall of the citadel, as stated above, is identified by a large pit lined with coursed rubble masonry, 12.45m in diameter north-west to south-east, and 14.65m in diameter south-west to north-east. The irregular shape is partly due to its being given a roughly octagonal form on the north side. It seems fairly certain that this stonework is part of the foundation wall; as the platform of the church was 10 *dhirā'* high, the original ground level could be nearly 5m underground today, yet the original floor of the church would still have been above the present ground level. It seems quite possible that there was a crypt within the walls of the surviving octagon; this is particularly likely if the church was modelled on the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, a possibility which is discussed below.

West of the open space in which this pit is situated is a block of houses with a curiously rectangular shape on the eastern, southern and western sides. It is particularly noticeable that the southern side of this block of houses is exactly on an east-west axis, and is slightly more than 10m south of the east-west axis of the pit. This rectangular block has at its western and end another open space entered by four streets from different directions. It seems possible that this is the original entrance square for the church.

That this block of houses is built on the foundation walls of the main body of the church seems confirmed by the dimensions given in the description of the church. The length of the block is 55m, and the houses end 5m from the edge of the pit; al-Azraqī gives the length of the nave and choir together as 80 plus 40 *dhirā'*, that is, 58m without the wall thicknesses.

The west-east orientation parallels the orientation of Axumite churches in Ethiopia.

In the Great Mosque in Ṣan'ā' there are four capitals which originally carried crosses on all their faces, as well as three other capitals of a related shape without crosses, and a number of decorated column shafts (pl. 18.20). The capitals with crosses are identical with capitals found in the ruins of St. Mary of Zion in Axum,[55] built, according to a seventeenth century text, in 372 A.D. and finished in 424 A.D.[56] It seems quite possible, however, that the cathedral was extended or altered a century later, after the successful campaigns in southern Arabia, that is, about the same time as the church in Ṣan'ā' was built.

Although the cathedral in Axum was destroyed in the 17th century and a small one built in its place, the original platform of the great church remains, and from this and earlier descriptions of it, it is possible to reconstruct its plan and dimensions.[57] The church was elevated on a platform, it had a nave with five aisles ending in an east end with seven parallel chapels. More important, its total length was 125 cubits or *ell,* each *ell* calculated

47 *Tārīkh,* ed. M. J. de Goeje et alii, I, 935.

48 B. T. A. Evetts and A. Butler, *The churches and monasteries of Egypt,* Oxford, 1895, reprint, 1969, 300-2. The Arabic text is ungrammatical, and both the text itself and the translation, at least here, unreliable.

49 The translators evidently read *'umud,* but to read a verb here appears better to me, given Abū Ṣāliḥ's weak Arabic. *Qā'im wa-nā'im* seems to me to be an architectural phrase not understood by the translators.

50 Sense, and perhaps also the reading, dubious.

51 Dozy, *Supplément, al-yāqūt al-Bahramānī, escarboucle;* a well known term.

52 One deduces from the passing reference in al-Rāzī, *Tārikh,* 109, that al-Qalis was later reckoned a sector of Ṣan'ā'.

53 Reading Anūshirwān for Abū Sharwān. The places seem unknown. If the Amīr of the Abnā' resided in Ṣan'ā' then one should look for them in this district, but he might have resided at Dhamār. Ẓafār south east of Yarīm which had a large church of which almost nothing is left fits the description geographically but it is not reported that Kisrā's Amīr ever resided there.

54 Muḥammad al-Akwa', *Iklīl I,* I, 182, note, avers that there there were Christians in Najrān until the beginning of the 7th/13th century according to Yemeni historians, until the days of al-Manṣūr 'Abdullāh b. Ḥamzah, then they finally disappeared.

55 See E. Littman, U. v. Krenker, and Th. v. Lüpke, *Deutsche Axum Expedition,* Berlin, 1913, II, 106.

56 See C. Conti Rossini, S.S.C.O. 54, *Liber Axumae,* translated in C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies,* Cambridge, 1961, II, 525.

57 E. Littman etc., op. cit., II, 140; and D. Buxton and D. Matthews, 'The reconstruction of vanished Axumite buildings', *Rassegna di studi Ethiopici,* Roma, 1971-2, XXV, 53-77. The latter study is comprehensive but speculative; in several major points, such as the capitals, and the decoration it seems to ignore the surviving evidence.

by Littmann, von Krenker and von Lüpke as a little less than half a metre.[58] The al-Azraqī dimension for the total length of the nave and vaulted choir (*īwān*) of the Ṣan'ā' church is 120 *dhirā'*, each *dhirā'* being almost certainly the 'Abbāsid *dhirā'* of 48.25cm. From this it seems clear that the *ell* and the *dhirā'* of the early Islamic period were effectively the same measure. So that the lengths of the bodies of the two churches were roughly equal, though the Ṣan'ā' church had added to it, at the eastern end, a further 30 *dhirā'* in the diameter of the domed eastern chapel plus the width of its walls. The total height of the Axum church was 32 *ell*, that of the Ṣan'ā' church 33.5 *dhirā'*. On the other hand the nave of the Axum cathedral was 47 *ell* wide, whereas the Ṣan'ā' church is given as 40 *dhirā'* wide. At its east end the Axum church was increased in width by its seven chapels to 92 *ell*. It seems that in overall area these two churches were closely comparable, as indeed they were in the design of their stone capitals.

How are we to explain, then, the presence of a large domed chamber as a feature in the Ṣan'ā' church when it does not occur in the plan of the church in Axum? The explanation seems to lie in the interest shown by the Byzantine empire in the Axumite conquest of southern Arabia,[59] and more particularly the interest taken by the Syrian Christians.[60] From the description of the church and the fact that its mosaics were taken to decorate the Ka'bah in Mecca in 65/684,[61] it is possible to judge that it was closer to Byzantine architecture, at least in part, than Axumite architecture in Ethiopia is thought to have been.[62] The plan of the church, from al-Azraqī's description, was of Syrian type, in this case directly derived from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which has a domed octagonal chapel 16m in diameter at the end of a five-aisled nave 26m wide,[63] and it was thus in turn linked in type to the sacred domed church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.[64]

Smaller domes are known in chapels behind or above the altar in later Ethiopian churches. The Ṣan'ā' church is unusual in the large size of its dome, and in the use of a Byzantine octagon in plan.[65] The decorated beams referred to by al-Azraqī may have been braces to the dome or to the barrel vault of the choir; but their length does not relate to any dimensions in the plan and seems likely to have been exaggerated. The alabaster panel referred to in the domed chapel was probably a large top-light in the centre of the dome, like those smaller ones that survive in front of the *miḥrāb* in the Great Mosque (pl. 18.32). From the reference at the beginning of al-Azraqī's description to the Ṣan'ā' church being 'rectangular', it seems possible that the octagon was incorporated within an enclosing outer wall, the narrow remaining spaces on either side possibly serving as chapels. This regular shape for the whole church conforms closely with later Ethiopian practice. The dome, or rather, the roof over it, seems to have projected above the rest of the church as happened at Bethlehem; it is doubtful whether it could have reached the stated height of 60 *dhirā'*, that is, 29m.

The great size mentioned for the open-air ambulatory around the church (200 *dhirā'*, or 96.5m) appears likely to be an error which has crept into the text. The Axum church stood within a large walled enclosure, but excavation has shown that this was clustered with buildings. An open space for ambulation between 50 *dhirā'* and 100 *dhirā'* wide is more probable.

58 Op. cit.

59 Cf. Procopious, *History of the Wars*, ed. H. B. Dewing, London, 1958, I, 188-9, 191-6, ff; Photius, *The Library of Photius*, trans. J. H. Freese, London, 1920.

60 Cf. C. H. Sellassie, *Ancient and medieval Ethiopian history*, Addis Ababa, 1972, 131-3, in which the Syriac texts relating to the previous persecution and the conquest are listed, as well as the Greek texts.

61 Mas'ūdī, *Prairies*, edit. and trans. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, Paris, 1861-77, 192-3.

62 In addition to the authorities listed above, see L. Bianchi Barriviera, 'Le chiese in roccia di Lalibela', *Rassegna di study ethiopici*, XVIII, 1962 and XIX, 1963, D. R. Buxton, 'The Christian antiquities of Northern Ethiopia', *Archaeologia*, XCII, 1947, and 'The Rock-hewn and other medieval churches of Tigre Province, Ethiopia', *Archaeologia*, CIII, 1971, and Ruth Plant and D. R. Buxton, 'Rock-hewn churches of the Tigre Province' in *Ethiopia Observer*, Addis Ababa, 1974, XIII, 3.

63 For illustrations, see W. Harvey, *'Structural survey of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem*, Oxford, 1935; 'The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem', *Archaeologia*, LXXXVII, 1937; R. W. Hamilton, *Guide to Bethlehem*, Palestine, 1939; and J. W. Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine*, London, 1941.

64 It is possible that *al-kanīsah* and *al-Qalīs* were the same building (cf. Yāqūt, quoted earlier), and that there was some faith in the legend reported by al-Rāzī that Jesus entered Ṣan'ā' and prayed on the site of *al-kanīsah*; and the Christians took the place of the *kanīsah* in Ṣan'ā' following his prayer place. This would explain the treatment of the east end of the church as a 'martyrion', a site connected with the life of Jesus, and link it logically with the churches at Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

65 The stone capitals and column shafts, together with two fragments of carved wood, preserved in the Great Mosque, are similarly much more Byzantine in style than traditional Axumite—so much so that their parallels in Axum were omitted by Buxton and Matthews from their restoration of the cathedral there as being irreconcilable with what they knew of that architectural style, see n, 47 above. Columns of the same bevelled type as are found in the Great Mosque can be seen in the church of Chergos at Wugro in Ethiopia, carrying capitals of the same shape, but undecorated, as the Ṣan'ā' and Axum capitals with crosses. Illustrated in Buxton, *Archaeologia*, 1971, CIII, Pl. XXIIIa.